Aid groups warn of catastrophic health crisis in CAR

Andrew Green  Lancet

With clashes still continuing in the Central African Republic, aid groups say the health and humanitarian situation looks set to deteriorate even further. Andrew Green reports. There is no guarantee of safety for many thousands of people living in the Central African Republic (CAR), let alone access to health care or other basic services. Months of ongoing clashes between rival militias have left at least 2000 people dead and forced 700 000 others to flee their homes for safety. Aid groups are warning that without greater efforts to bring the fighting under control and scale up the humanitarian response, an already-abysmal situation will deteriorate even further. And already the UN estimates more than half the population of 4·6 million people are in need of assistance.

The crisis started in December, 2012, when a coalition of mainly Muslim rebels, calling themselves Seleka—or “alliance” in the local language—advanced on the capital, Bangui. They took control of it in March last year, amid allegations that they had targeted the country’s Christians in deadly attacks. Members of the Christian community organised their own militias, known as anti-Balaka, for reprisal attacks on the minority Muslim population. The tit-for-tat fighting has grown steadily worse since Seleka leader, Michel Djotodia, went into exile in January under pressure from the international community. Within Bangui alone, nearly 300 000 people are now sheltering at camps, too scared to venture back out into the city. There are fears the country is permanently fracturing along religious lines. “We are caught in a sense of helplessness faced with extreme violence, treating thousands of wounded, and seeing hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their homes as it is their only option to avoid being slaughtered”, Joanne Liu, the international president of Médecins Sans Frontières, said in a statement.

A combination of more than 6000 African and French troops have been unable to stem the fighting, although they have provided some protection as convoys carrying thousands of Muslims have left Bangui for other countries. By late February, UN High Commissioner for Refugees spokesperson Adrian Edwards was warning 15 000 people scattered across 18 locations were “at very high risk of attack and urgently need better security”. It is not clear when—or if—it will arrive.

Then there are the crises lurking beneath the security needs. “Once you have security, you'll get access”, says Emma Fanning, Oxfam's humanitarian and conflict policy advisor in Bangui. “Then funding for NGOs [non-governmental organisations] will be the big thing.” That's because addressing the country's overwhelming need will come with a substantial price tag: the UN and aid agencies have requested US$551 million to fund their response this year. So far they have received $79 million.

The money is needed to rebuild the country from scratch—everything from rebooting the education system to addressing acute health needs. At the top of the list is making sure people get enough to eat. Already 1·3 million people are in need of immediate food assistance; 90% of them eat only one meal a day. The UN is warning at least 28 000 children will suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year. The situation looks to become worse as traders, who are largely Muslim, continue to flee and trucks refuse to travel insecure roads to deliver goods, meaning less and less food is available in
the markets. Meanwhile, the rainy season looms, promising to further reduce the minimal access humanitarian groups currently have and increase cases of malaria and water-borne diseases. Although a new government, led by Catherine Samba-Panza, has stepped in to replace the Seleka, there is little they can offer in terms of service provision. That leaves local and international aid groups to fill what gaps they can. “We were supposed to support the health system”, says Bonaventure Bazirutwabo, who runs the International Committee of the Red Cross's medical programmes in CAR. “For the time being, there is no health system available in Bangui or in the rest of the country. Which means that if the situation is to remain as it is, we can expect a catastrophic situation for the population regarding health issues.”

As the violence continues, the needs will multiply. Within the displacement camps there are concerns about disease outbreaks, fuelled by unclean water and not enough sanitation facilities. The UN is warning of possible measles outbreaks, even as groups try to immunise as many children as possible. The situation is almost certainly worse outside Bangui and outside the camps, where most people are cutoff from even basic aid. Until the government or regional and international forces can guarantee people's security, it is going to stay that way.

Full-size image (30K) Anadolu Agency/Getty Images